



Opera Bufo

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Opera Bufo: Expanded Edition

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Preface

An opera bufa (or “opera buffa”) is a comic opera. It’s a term and a genre which Mary Evelyn Harju introduced me to. The idea of writing the poetry equivalent of an opera bufa is one that occurred to me as viable for a number of reasons, in the mid-Aughts. The first reason was practical— it was time, I felt, to start writing books, rather than just writing poems in a scattershot manner. It was also difficult not to notice that avant-garde/experimental poets in my age group were having a more than reasonable amount of success with book-length manuscripts of interlocking prose poems. When a group of younger poets who had all done their MFAs at U of Mass Amherst (Mary Harju had also done undergrad time there) descended on Center City Philly in the mid-Aughts (Eric Baus, Nick Moudry, Laura Solomon, Juliette Lee, Dorothea “Dottie” Lasky), they brought with them this bias and sensibility. Eric Baus, particularly, though he only spent a year at Temple (’06-’07), managed to impress on me the many advantages of approaching book-length manuscripts this way. I decided, however, that if I was going to bow to a trend and do what Baus had done, I was going to do it my way— with a strong narrative voice and backbone, and with thematics in general not neglected. The idea of writing a comic opera appealed to me, because it is an unlikely juxtaposition (avant-garde poetry with comic opera) and because it would allow me to explore the interrelationship between music, language, and performance, a vitally important interrelationship in Aughts Philadelphia.

Opera Bufa was my first full-length print book. It was released almost precisely co-terminously with the Blazevox e-book *Beams* in the early autumn of ’07. When I visited Chicago again in early ’08, I managed to place a few copies at Myopic Books in Wicker Park, where I had read in December ’06. Through an interesting collusion of events, it was picked up by Chicago poetess Laura Goldstein to teach at Loyola University Chicago; and when I visited Chicago in the summer of ’08, I lectured to one of Laura’s classes at Loyola behind *Opera Bufa*. It was included on their syllabus. Goldstein herself wrote a perceptive review of the book for the Chicago e-zine *moria* which is included here.

Of all of my books, *Opera Bufa* is the one which was born most squarely from the context of contemporary avant-garde poetry— though bits of Wordsworth and Eliot are woven into the text, it has the stamp of the mid-Aughts Amer-Po zeitgeist on it. It is still more continental than was common for that niche, which I designed it to be. One disadvantage which *Opera Bufa* has is that the book is more than the sum of its pieces; but when the pieces have been isolated and published apart from the ur-text, they cannot be representative. The book needs to be read as a whole, or not at all. It is also a book which has spawned some imitations. The narrative voice here is light and whimsical (as befits an opera bufa), and not too fraught with multiple meanings or philosophical quiddities. In other words, and like *Chimes* (though for different reasons), it is a book Americans can accept. As such, it has been taught with some frequency in America (especially in the Chicago area), and embraced. Still, I would like to hope that the lightness and breeziness of the text carry some serious undercurrents— that literature, like opera, is a kind of performance; and that the performative nature of texts make them active, rather than passive, agents in the world. The text also argues for a frank approach to sex and sexuality; rather than the coy evasiveness then more common. That texts can and should be seductive is something Roland Barthes used to discuss; and Barthes and France are an influence here.

#1

Losing is the lugubriousness of Chopin. What's lost might be a sea shell or a tea cup or the bloody scalp of an Indian; it hardly matters. When you are lost, the heart recedes from exterior currents, too much in sync with itself, its groove vicissitudes. Each encounter, rather than revealing new rhythms, is experienced as a clangorous din, a pounding. The effect of this pounding is to push the heart deeper and deeper into pitiless darkness. The darkness is pitiless because it has no clear ending. The rhythms are pitiless because we do not know how they began. We find pity and it betrays us with a stray fondle. We squirm within ourselves to the sound of the Devil's opera bufa.

#2

You may stride streets like Oskar with tin drum, cracking glass with a solid shriek, taking Madonnas hostage, assaulting exhausted nurses lying prone on shag carpets. There are nurses and nurses; some have carnations. You want to serve; your hands are still masterful.

#3

Pluto sets Orpheus on your ass. Plucking out a minor-seventh bridge, he holds you in legato thrall. Rhythms become streams of possible shoe-lace, slugs of 3 a.m. Scotch, lust after thy neighbor's daughter, mooning on the lawn.

#4

The principle of sufficient reason has pinned you to a mattress and is coming inside you. You are a plantation officer after the lost war. Your cache of black carnations marks out a no-fly zone, bloody scalps of third wheels. You see how richly layered you are, but frosting is visible.

#5

It's not funny, that you've left a body count. You're up in stiff urban trees, you've known unrest. Not that you don't harmonize with concrete; just that you mix concretely. There is recalcitrance in your Wellington boots, a blatant sell-out in your dancing; China girls approach you in dank basements.

#6

Am I daft to see imbecility in mercy? Three men, one gesturing, address perfumes of Venus. Yes, I affirm certain deadness in disturbances of black jackets. No, I do not believe a blue sports jersey is a treasure. I have made up a song to go with the song of this chanteuse. What silly trills, love of languor, appreciation of origins of apples. The core is not to be ditched. The apple is not to be pulled.

#7

If you were a yellow balloon in tall leaning trees, I'd be a girl in purple impaled between pillars. If you were a cup of finished ice cream, I'd be a brown-eyed moon-goddess. Is the human heart a Parisian kitchen? Are lamb-chops better than avarice? Are you churned like butter from Dantescan depths? Am I warm and willful as a shop-girl's thighs, stuck with grasses to a farmer's boots? Lunatics hover on branches, pushing me down into sleep; swans at the window, watching hail fall in diagonal darts. Your railings border me, yet toss my words up into gleaming squares. Priests look back and forth, veiny hands. Shadows strike the angels from their perch. Somewhere inside is a reference.

#8

This is all a bridge between a verse and chorus. That's how the sky exudes its musk, right before breaking down and buying a ranch. You find my earrings glamorous, and they were left by my bed by a lover who learned from porn. She was always crabby.

#9

It's always brown-hewn burglars sending drain-you vibes through Ethernet. Not that one can internalize mind-scabs, but that the brown-minded must spread shit. What kind of tumescence gets consummated via these kinks? What ribald ruby-red jumps live from these booby traps? Nothing but antiquated horse-corsets passing murals, gun-slung brothers sprung from Rite Aid, orange vodka-eaters. I fit into this like a mentholated ciggy in a Presbyterian church, which is to say, the city has heroes ducking under awnings, semen smells in tightly packed alleys, particularities.

#10

What does he say, the porridge-hearted victor, as troops rub ermine on his thighs? He is not only hermaphroditic, he complains of being too much like Cleopatra. He is only a bruised pear, yet words come out of him, tunes replay in his head like flies on ice cream. I am him as a fish is a bicycle but a fish on a bicycle would be too much, like Henna-dyed Shakespearean joust-a-bouts.

#11

All minor chords are dreadful when prolonged by Valium. Not that I condescend to be anything but minor. Not that I'd give myself an A. Actually, I would, but then not every poem I like begins *Roses are red, Violets are blue*. I understand newness. I understand membranes. I understand that a bald pate does not signify superior understanding. I can't give you anything, and vice versa. Go back to the opening.

#12

It is simply bereavement that leads us here, to these images. It is a matter of fucking upstairs, getting the maids wet. What you see is what you see, cadavers in copses, perfectly good mushrooms, a tent to shelter red-heads. Don't accuse yourself of blasphemy for marching sideways, crab-like, towards Exit signs. Any kind of soft-shoe swagger remains inappropriate. Stay where shadows press themselves in upon you. Stay with the purple riders and their sage buttons. Stay safe within danger.

#13

O, for the strength to strip a stripper. Isn't that wanted by the forces swirling in eddies around the Delaware? Isn't that what becomes material? Not if you think one night can be micro, macro, all kinds of crows. Not if what you really want is to pick at my liver. Let's face it, you were never more than a soul-pygmy. You were a soul-gypsy by yourself, to yourself. We learn as life elongates that personal feelings about persons are not important. We learn that we are all pygmies. Your failure was in measuring yourself against ants, as if a beam and a magnifying glass could cure you. You should be so lucky.

#14

I can't help but influence pigeons in the cream cheese. You know what I mean. When you eat something that's bigger than your head, you get messy. It's been that way since a flock of seagulls pitched tents in New Mexico. They were just camping, they said. Anyway, I detonate. I feel it is best to confess right at the beginning. What I confess is a salad at a fast-food restaurant, of which I feel dispossessed. Things go on. Things continue. It's all about systems. It's all about seagulls.

#15

Personally, I don't care if a baseball penetrated your basement window. All I see is a framework of jagged glass. I don't much like it, nor do I consider Klonopin an appropriate substitute for Independence Day. If (on alternate Fridays) you remember to do the funky chicken, so much the better. What I want to see is you coming out of come. I want to see geysers, all-sorts, licorice, Now-and-Laters. I want to see you move past Debussy into Mozart. You know, play faster or something.

#16

You're all out to lunch, you Amherst wafer-eaters. You forgot that Billy the Kid, unlike Christ, was not resurrected. The pictures you leave on lampposts signify low self-esteem. Your cozy brasserie is not to be bush-whacked. As for me, I have moved beyond ten-of-swords mentalities. Not that I count you out. I just don't know what bag you are zipped into. It looks not very fur-lined to me.

#17

I don't know who my friends want. I could be a French-speaking gopher. I could grope every freckle on a red-head's behind. I could fickle myself in plaster or plastic. Of the many possibilities, I feel closest to mother's voices please-touching; concretes, red-brick wings, soaring up through Baudelaire's tendonitis. I ache with him.

#18

I like you, yes, but it's serious, kid. Don't imagine you can hide your backyard in a magnolia tree's bark-shedding trunk. If your passion arrives in a non-Christian context, say *Thank you Buddha*. You will never lack conundrums as long as line after line after line demands to be born like a good kidney bean.

#19

Being stalked by a sting-ray in slap-happy crematoriums is not a simple matter. Deadness develops, makes lists, checks things off. You-don't-have keeps adding up to gaggles of slugs underneath.

#20

That night I had your heart-attack, I was alone, moon-streaked, somnolent. There is a soul-Net bigger than the one we know. There are things you can catch, Piscean, Aquarian, Scorpion. Back on that sun-glassed, sin-spattered street, back into my eager tense-ready nodding, back into that inter-connected nexus emitting blue-purple sparks over every picture in the paper, every poem in the picture, every pruned, festooned image in the poem. I've got your back.

#21

First thing in the morning, I hear about a Mob-mad Dick wearing a black velvet hood all over Washington, stomping weedy ground in SS boots. This is a man who sings Gregorian chants as he pulls hair-trigger shit-loads from his arse. I don't connect, and my non-connection includes running four miles along the scud-less Schuylkill. I see an edgy apocalypse in each half-mile marker, a prod at each lemonade stand, a clown-class dragging tired skin across street-bones. As you grow older, oldness grows like a fungus around your extremities. Now, I sit and write this opera and it appears like a walrus or otter saying *I am that I.*

#22

There is no place in business for me. I was born to endlessness of any kind, of the kind that breathes fire dragon gold through nostrils of untamed street-corner harmonies. Despite this fact, I like trees, I could go camping if I weren't so marshmallow soft, such a Hercules of perpetually moving inaction. Or, I could just go camp.

#23

I can't make sense of anything anymore, not even riding the trolley past a gleaming, soot-speckled Mini-Mart in morning's ardent sunshine. Every passenger inhabits a non-Prada paradise, where what you have is simply a matter of Kool composure, fertile lassitude, flea markets and the plethora of miniscule trinkets therein. Every grainy facet floods the eye with color, but blackness, my dear, is the ground we walk on. Blackness is the door to rebirth. I want to come out and be colorless. I want to come out and give ashram orders to a meditating world. Order itself is beyond me.

#24

I do not give a damn for any rankings, as I know preeminence is an old European myth meant to pickle pens and keyboards. I have judged myself, found myself a person, found myself not an artist but an art-is, an ink otter, a bubble-blown frog hopped up on saying personal things backwards and masked. I sing this scintillating aria not for the bull-nuts in the Peanut Gallery, but for all readers w nuts. Keep your snake-tail eating language for language-guinea pigs, keep your pug-face for the aesthete tax collecting slobber-heads. I've hewn a new key from a new, chicken-scented, turkey-basted variety of froth. I know damn well what you've hewn. Hew off.

#25

Assuming I remain a tag-labeled individual, naught remains but to white out any yellows, apply patches of loose color to squarely composed areas, brushstroke a raw rheumy red heart, beaten like a time-rusted gong, onto each firmament that rises and sets on canvases arrayed, grey-grained. This I will do, w no uneasiness. What must be shown is mandatory as income tax.

#26

What's between me and you is this flower-wall in a rose-fringed corner of some invisible curtained garden. I am very far away from what knowing is.

#27

My friends and I are groping to create a science of imaginary solutions, one of which is Pepto-Bismol repeated in vats and poured over two copulating sweat-drenched animals emitting squeals in octaves. The history of popcorn is a minor third that can be squelched by intense bed-thuds. Every mattress is a major third, every home-stretch a suspended fourth, every new Kama Sutra position a bent note in the Dorian mode. There is no grey. It's wild.

#28

I say “we,” I mean the people counting ravens. I mean the circle-minded carnival otters holding down forts. We know who we are, but are very far from knowing who planted what. I say, use the turnips to write, make a cake w teeth-pealed carrots, but save the lettuce. We should hold on to the village green until a new harrow is made, which can turn us over, on Proustian sick-beds, to enumerate levels and layers of cockroaches, clinging to life, courting Keith Richards.

#29

There is an engraving on the corner of your left cheek, placed there by me, which speaks of dead queens, frilly shirts, stoned wanderers. What I mean is, I am capable of bestowing silver-stenciled decorations on you, and will continue to do so for as long as I can sharpen my tools along the edges of your fire escape. We have forged, in the smithy of our souls, a country recreated from borders of what was dreamed between us, rose-delicate, so much investigation. There is naught left to shimmy but little diamond-hooded imps sprung out from tips of our fingers, ground down to astral sparks when light is brought down, channeled through ritual.

#30

Things tank, things fall apart, centers cannot hold, and the only second coming you can count on you can download for free on the Internet. I am personally involved in sun-breaks following storms, scandals of moss and weeds, kick-back payments over pots of world-weary gumbo, so much *meshigas*. What I am looking for is an arpeggio including history, a vibrato that is not quiet, an aria in the real language of men.

#31

If you weren't so scandal-happy, I might consider depositing a ton of bricks between your carburetor and fan-belt. The fact is, darling, that my opera is not soap. All kinds of buffoonery have meaning in this microcosmic environment, like goldfish eating Trollope-reading directors of electricity. I am confident that I will not be left alone. I am also sure that the fish-monger backwards-going Polonius-type psychos will get stuck behind me. *Eat me*, I will say to them, and invite them to look, touch, fondle, grope the thin air around my queen's shins.

#32

I have danced on pins and needles since Socrates realized semantics were a peach of a smash of a pop-tart. I have encompassed centuries, I ride in gondolas, I celebrate Lent, I have coffee with Balzac. If you want to surround me with anything but freedom, Dante has opened up a specific ring in Hades just for you. It is shaped like a wall-papered nursery. There are malicious spirits on baseball cards. You become gum.

#33

Out there, in the wider world, automatons spit shards, bullets, videotapes, all wound to slit and reveal vulnerable redness. They are beyond laughter. The air they breathe is flesh they bite into. The beds they sleep in are nailed, and they are nailed, and consciousness becomes a loose, rusty, crud-tinged nail. I wonder that I am anxious, and laugh at myself for wondering. What place for Don Rickles in a boot-camp of the soul? *Harder, harder*, I say to myself, doing breast-stroke laps in the deep end of brine vats.

#34

It is brave to be old so that one may become young. You can do double dismounts like a cat on pot. You can move beyond the *dead man hopping* phenomenon. When you sit in a half-lotus, your lolling tongue rests comfortably on old metaphors. Suddenly, the moon is enough. Suddenly, flowers are worth looking at, and you are a person. There is splendor in just walking around. There is air to breathe. Who knows, you might be able to stay a person for more than a moment. With luck, axioms become trees. Climb them.

#35

I sing to her in raspy, whiskey-voiced bliss. It's a honky-tonk song with considerable tonal variation. Not far from twelve-bar blues, it's got a turnaround and a bridge, including four beats on the relative minor. You might mistake this section for *Earth Angel*, and in fact that's what she is. The city's squeal and tremor sings along with me— rev, snarl, strum. We make a Hallelujah Chorus for a new Iron Age.

#36

I am seeing Mercury go Retrograde in a fly's anus. There is a delay in delivering my poetry to the old wooden bucket. Yet, I roll with the punches. Just yesterday I gathered geraniums to give to madmen. I ate a liver sausage sandwich, perched in grass. I found myself rooted in history. Spare me your stories of insubstantial fluff. Spare me the stale victuals, the I'm-on-top rhetoric. I have seen a caduceus in the sky, pointing to a pile of my papers. I am wanted by the FBI, and the Central Intuitive Agency. I project to the back row. Though life be a confectionary lemon, I suck it.

#37

There is backwards masking mixed into the mix tape I sent you. Satan himself says he is himself but you need a turntable to hear it. The experience of hearing Satan's voice backwards may be absorptive for you. It was for me. I immediately fornicated with three high priestesses. I did a line of cocaine off a shag carpet, put on an Andy Gibb tee shirt, and wandered around looking for Snow Caps. I became possessed by a demon and I rose off the bed. I astral projected into the kitchen and my head was a Necco wafer.

#38

I was a cadaver in a copse until a cop arrested me. I was a convict in a jumpsuit until I jumped bail. I was a hitchhiker under galactic moon dust until I saw the sun. I was the sun as it rose and I shone on my dead self. I was a copse under the sun. I was a convict and a copse. I was all of this until I learned that you are what you see. I was what I saw until I saw that my eyes were shut. I opened my eyes to a kind of vacancy. I opened my arms to delinquency. I do not see anything now, and it rings.

#39

I did it to myself. I rolled down hills. I twirled in circles. I partook of strange drugs. It was on a trip of this kind that I met Sunny Jim, who claimed to have many minds. I never believed him, still don't. Why should I?

#40

I was playing a lute in the Court of Ferdinand. I was being courtly. I was displaying all the *sprezzatura* that I could. I did not reckon that it was actually 2007. I remained strangely unaware that electricity had been discovered. I picked up a daffodil; it became a cell phone. I picked up a quill; it became a bottle of Nyquil. I realized that I was in the wrong century. I would have to live through hundreds of years to get to where I was. I would have to spontaneously regenerate. I saw my lute become a Stratocaster. I saw the court become the Bowery Ballroom. I only knew two scales, and I played them every which way. I heard deafening applause. I saw Ferdinand wearing Speedos.

#41

I have made a habit of courting buffoons. I have listened to a British waitress ask me, *would you like a scone or a buffoon?* I have eaten scones and buffoons together, with cheese and cherry preserves. I have felt that scones and buffoons are somehow related, especially where Tennyson is concerned. I have felt Tennyson to be both a scone and a buffoon. I am ready (finally) to eat a scone alone. I no longer need buffoons in my life. I have covered *Freebird* for the last time. I am ready to be free. I am ready to cherry.

#42

I often feel surrounded by lightweights. I frequently shine a light on their lightness, only to find blackness hidden in their cuffs. I hear them, lightweight and dark, pronouncing on the eligibility of cretins. I see them applauding a show of daft penguins. I drink with them, and they out-drink me. I talk with them, and they out-talk me. I write alone, and I have found no other way to sing. I box them simply by breathing.

#43

There was a girl on a hill. She was shrouded by a wash of shadow. In the background, a steeple peeked through blue. There were clotted sky-arteries. Light was moving on the hill and on the girl. She remained fixed. A sound like thunder made jarring waves. She was facing me. I was floating above a different hill. The picture before me was like a face. The girl knelt where a mouth should've been.

#44

There I was in bed in a toy store. I had a fever. I was also a girl in the corner who wanted to get in bed with me. There was a blonde apparition, a loudmouth, pacing a bit like Patton. I felt strained from being me and also being someone else. In retrospect, it seems strange that no toys were visible. It is also curious that, in the dream, I happened to be a famous musician. No determinate ending presented itself. Patton might've become a stuffed animal, I can't remember. Something was said that meant war: *don't toy with me.*

#45

I spotted a bluebird. I got in an amorous tussle. I saw a thousand hues, and each was differently used. *She's got soul*. I felt it was a matter of vibes. The lightweights and toy stores were behind me. The world was reduced to a back seat. The bluebird was a woman and the woman was more than just flying. Each word had a depth and a weight. Each look had a color and a shape. Each moment that passed was *on the way home*. Our sound: *pianissimo*.

#46

What has been lost thus far? It's just tar on a highway, bound for ocean. Or, it's the migratory flight of a carrier pigeon. It is all things that move and breathe, coalesced into sound. It is Odette's tune in Swann's mind. It is octaves, repeated in a funhouse mirror until a decibel level is reached that a dog alone may hear. I am the dog that hears, the dog that conducts, the dog that puts bones on tables. The bones are all gone under a hill. The dogs are all gone under a footlight. There are no footnotes.

#47

Here is where a climax should be: in a closet, freshly washed, on a hanger. There is a crescendo in stasis, like a Buddha-as-housemaid. So, no shattered glass in this opera.

#48

Maria Callas smokes a post-coital cigarette. Her legs dangle over the stage's edge. She has been pounded. She, too, has left a body count. She has been on the hill. She has been a mouth, a bluebird, a curtain. *We are all purple riders*, she says, blowing smoke. *We are all tender-hearted as eunuchs, small as mix tapes*. Maria, the Devil has entered you. Things have become what they are not. The opera-goers are restless. You had better produce more than ashes. You had better throw out your stubs. It's encore time.

#49

I follow Maria to the stage door. I walk with her through a flower-wall. *Tender hearts are made to be broken*, she says, *I want your ton of bricks*. I think that Maria is promiscuous. I think I am in bed with Baudelaire and Jeanne Duval. I think many confused thoughts. Meanwhile, Maria has taken out a caduceus. She caresses it. She calls it many names. Somehow it is attached to me. Somehow it is wired to feel what I feel. We lay in a half-lotus. We lay in dank repose. Maria has already done this. I wonder if this amounts to *La Boheme* for weirdos. Skin is our funny toy store. We buy it.

#50

You spent forty-seven poems looking for me, Maria says. You were talking in expansive, fluorescent, Crayola circles. All I can say is, I remember poundings and baseball cards and tons of bricks. I remember daftness and deftness disappearing. I remember gum, bruises, abusing ice cubes. I know that I had to dream an opera to really sing. I know I had to dream singing to really write. As for fluorescence, those crayons were always my favorites anyway. If the color is off, it's because my set collapsed, if not into nullity, then into plurality. I remember a city and a story. I am many stories up.

#51

It is left to Maria to return me to my duties. *Your song is a newly filled crescent moon*, she says, gesturing to my eyes, where notes flow into. Maria has made a hologram of herself for me. She has strapped it to my hands like cuffs. She has left me offstage, recounting when I found a way of being in tune with rows of chairs.

#52

Am I a tired old man? Am I mysteriously young? Or is it that youth and old age both have equal leverage in song, like major and minor? Whatever stage of life has been born into me, I know now that song cannot be spared when life and death adhere. I know life and death, I know the contours of them; they are bed sheets to me. They do not wind around, but lay beneath each performance. They are the reason why buffoons must be rebuffed, why dodos must be done in. They are no kind of beggar's banquet. Adherence is my tribute to this interminable fret board, this double-stopped coil.

#53

I am beginning an inventory. I am in possession of songs. I am in possession of labor, and love's labors lost. I am capable of experiencing Mini-Marts. I inhabit an operatic landscape. I have loved a girl. I have also loved a Maria. I am noticing a strange poverty in richness. I am cleaning up the stage for this to happen again. I am counting on scones to butter themselves. I am haunted by remorse for missed notes. I am nonetheless proud to have escaped the flatted fifth, *el Diablo en musica*. I am lucky because the Devil paid for my stage props. I have torn up our contract. I have contacted my attorney.

#54

The dressing room is filled with flowers. I wash off make-up, remove stage garments, congregate with various chorus members. I have moved from “I” to “we”. The opera is the story of all of our lives. When it ends, our lives may be recreated. This is possible because we know of what we consist. We are dust and dreams and druthers and so many cockroaches. No one will stop anytime soon. No one will give up rays of moon. No one will forget the feeling under footlights. Adrenaline permeates our conversations. There is an after-show party to be attended. There are hook-ups waiting for all of us.

#55

I am walking streets, arm in arm with a woman who designs props. It feels like the first mild day in March. I give in to idleness, thinking of Maria. Memory is sweet as reality, reality is sweet as dreams, and I have learned to what extent dreams are real. They may not be solid as a cast-iron pot, but they are *enough*. I feel this strongly as I kiss Ms. Props. I feel this even more strongly as she reaches around my neck as if to throttle me. *Oh no, I think, is this when I have to start singing again?* Alas, she only wants to feel me more deeply. It is the hour of feeling, when singing must cease.

#56

Ms. Props, jealous, wants to know about Maria. She, too, wants a ton of bricks. A song pops into my head, just a germ, and I know that another opera is beginning, as night bleeds into dawn. *Never you mind*, I say, *you are as pain-worthy as she, as precious in your meddling, as diligent in your scavenger hunt*. I feel a C chord changing to E minor, then an A minor changing to G, and I realize what Eternal Return means. It means that every fresh breath of life plants seeds that must die. It means that the death of music is the birth of tragedy that must be expressed musically. It means all this fooling around must be paid for in the oven of creation. Every kiss must be minted.

#57

I am writing again, and losing. I am lost in a funhouse maze. I must make it a new opera or die trying. I have had lovers of the last opera, now I must find lovers of an opera to come. What will subsist from opera to opera? It is a sense that our world is out of tune, and that the artist must set it in order; a sense that the artist is, in fact, an officer in an army of puffins, and commands an elite puffin brigade; finally, the recognition that songs must be created because too much silence is composed of dust and ash. I must create a staged Underworld, to prevent the actual Underworld from pummeling my life. I must beat Pluto at his own flaccidly undulant game. I score with every chord change.

#58

If only I felt that writing operas could change everything. If only I felt that life, concentrated into song, could be fruit juice for thirsty joggers. Alas, it is not so. Open mouths will continue to be unfilled. Open legs will continue to accept dross. Things that close, chemical, mineral, and otherwise, will remain closed; nothing will change. I can only do one thing: make nothing change beautifully. I am no longer haunted by echoes of Puccini. I know that all music is good, being music. I know that our most real riches are built of loss. I have become a giant of losing. I am simply monstrous, and monstrously fond of the Earth and its million daily deaths. I am consoled by no exit. I am dead to deadness, alive to death and life, and directed by street signs. Yet, I do not yield.

#59

This has been something. This has been more than cadaverous. This has been a seeded fruit moved by wind into a reclining position. This has been a way and a means, an end and a beginning, a pedestrian's right to cross streets in Vienna. This has given me a wing-tipped prowling carnivore, and I am meat as others are. As I move on, I am stricken with a half-nervous, half-ebullient sense of Eternal Return. What is coming has already come and will come again, plaintive as human nightingales trained for five octaves. What is coming is coming back to the loss that will be gained perpetually. O flip sides of paradox, how inscrutable and Sphinx-like you seem, until a bullet-chord pierces you, until an arpeggio elicits an earth-shattering purr!

#60

I can think of no afterthought. I can only say: *here I have been*. Music must bleed: let it. It will bleed into more and more of itself. It will spontaneously regenerate, nimble as an ice-walking fox in a blasted landscape. It will care for itself. I fall back like an exhausted lover, spent and famished. I am a cactus tree, full and hollow. I am one.

#1, 2, 3,4, first appeared in Upstairs at Duroc (France).

#5,6,7 first appeared in OCHO #9.

Several others first appeared in Otoliths Magazine, Simone Muench's Sharkforum, and the fourWeighteen print anthology from Charles Stuart University in Australia.

A portion of the book is also available to be listened to on PennSound.

Many thanks to Mary Harju, Susan Wallack, Larry Eisman, Steve Halle, Bill Allegrezza, Anny Ballardini, all my poetry friends everywhere, and a special thanks to Eric Baus and Noah Eli Gordon for teaching me what prose poems can do.

FROM CRITICAL WRITING ON ADAM FIELED

Laura Goldstein on “Opera Bufo”: moria (2008)

I was very fortunate to pick up a copy of *Opera Bufo* when I did. I went to see Andrew Lundwall and Daniela Olszewska read at Myopic books and was browsing the authors-who-have-been-here shelf before it started. I went upstairs and sat down. Andrew was late; he lives an hour or so outside of town. I started reading.

I don't know too much about opera, but I think that it would be a lovely experience in the spring, as is Adam's book, as is going to a good poetry reading, which is what I meant that I was fortunate to pick up a copy, right now, especially, when the spring is creeping in and melting up a bit of winter's hard and coldness. The book had some kind of similar effect on me, like music, as it is music, as it really is, and as it also uses as its larger metaphor.

The themes start and they start to mix. The way that they mix is the first part of the opera, a part which is sustained for a very large portion of the poem; so long, in fact, that I thought that was what the whole poem would be like. But it did change, and I very much appreciated that. I imagine that operas change partway through. I know our lives do. Adam writes, "as if you were a cup of finished ice-cream, I'd be a brown-eyed moon goddess"(11). Is this a good time to mention that I told Andrew after the reading that my favorite line of his was, "I want to eat some ice cream. I want to fuck my face with vanilla. Seems like it." Adam mentions right off that the rhythms are pitiless because we do not know how they began and this is a good example: "Rhythms become streams of possible shoe-lace, slugs of 3 a.m. Scotch, lust after thy neighbor's daughter, mooning on the lawn"(7) and later "You become gum"(36).

Adam latches onto rhythms that are already at play in the world and sifts into them his mix of observation, word play, conjecture, description, subversion and other games of linguistic and logic, testing out our frames of reference. Many sentences land themselves in a music of metaphor that made me keep wanting more. In this weird time of wanting to start a book that I see wing past my window on Goodreads or having guilt about setting one aside that I've already committed to publicly, it was just an absolute joy to want to keep reading and reading until I was finished. And, though I hate to admit this for fear that it reveals something about my attention span, this is rare.

Also related to spring, I felt very fortunate to be reading about so many actions that are happening outside from section to section, so much grass and color and even running along the Schuylkill, which makes me miss Philly in the springtime, too. In terms of the balance that Adam's creating in the book from section to section, he's bringing in a real record of the outside world to pour into his metaphors. This is not only a great springtime

thing to think about, but also an important poetic for getting the poet outside of themselves. It was riveting to watch Adam's real-time reactions as he wrote the world into the opera, which must ultimately be sung with a voice.

Well what do I want to say about the end of the opera. The opera begins to end and then it begins to know it is ending and then it is ending and then it ends. At one point, at the very beginning of the ending as I saw it, Adam writes, "I only knew two scales, and I played them every which way"(44) and then he writes, "I saw a thousand hues, and each was differently used" (49) and how can they both be true? Well they are in this opera. In the first statement, he admits that his initial range might seem limited, but in the next he shows that what he observes in the world is much more multiple. Although a bounded being, external experience is what, looking back to the first statement, allows him to create real complexity with his writing. A writer has only so many words but each encounter is new and provides new materials, new ideas, and new combinations of thoughts and words. There's an attention that Adam is drawing to this paradox of language that poetry permeates as he draws his opera to a close. Perhaps one of the things about opera is that it transmits a vital energy; besides its mimetic purpose as theater, large swells of sound are projected with so much skill into the confined space of the hall. Within *Opera Bufo*, there is real life stirring inside the language as it finds a climax out of the constraints of its own conjuring.

I finished *Opera Bufo* while I was getting my hair cut, another spring thing, getting rid of the heavy mess of growth on my head that had gotten out of control over the winter. Now I feel lighter. I guess that when it's time to finish a book of really fine poetry, "it is the hour of feeling, when singing must cease" (59). Adam writes, "If only I felt that life, concentrated into song, could be fruit juice for thirsty joggers. Alas, it is not so" (62). Well, maybe I'm in an especially optimistic mood right now, but I disagree.

Stacy Blair on Opera Bufo: Stoning the Devil (2008) (written for Laura Goldstein's poetry class at Loyola University Chicago)

Opera Bufo: "Divertimento Giocoso " or Coping with Absence?

Time, as a linear construction, tends to herd people into viewing their lives in terms of memory, present sensual stimulation, and hypothetical premonitions. The English language reflects this structure by allowing us to speak in various verbal tenses, and narratives that employ multiple temporal settings can transport the reader or auditor into emotional states contingent upon a temporal location designated by the author. We construct our perceptions of the world based not only on language, however but also on images that elicit emotional responses and generate new thoughts or ideas. Memory works in a similar way, by cataloguing images corresponding to one's emotional and physical state in the past, like a physical stamp on one's brain that tries, then, to translate it into words. Memory, which can take such a strong hold on one's perception, depends upon loss for its own creation, such that one must lose something in order to look back on it in memory. Poets have long been tackling the problem of forgetting and memory, coping with grief, mourning lost lovers or friends, and feeling out the concept of nostalgia through their work. In *Opera Bufo*, Adam Fieled builds an entire opera out of prose poems, weaving through it themes of sex, music, literature, and drugs, all of which become threads that attempt to explore this concept. His emotional release onto the page is a highly poetic form reduced to potent and poignant prose that describes losing as a means of artistic creation.

Throughout Fieled's opera, he remembers past lovers and the loss of physical objects, but he continually highlights the arbitrariness of the "what" that is gone, profiting from a focus on the expression engendered by absence. After all, the first line of his poetic musical score reads, "Losing is the lugubriousness of Chopin." (5) By equating "losing" with an interpretation of Chopin's style he transforms the concept of absence into the great work of an infamous composer in six words. Fieled underscores the importance of what comes from the emotional reaction caused by deprivation rather than the object or feeling originally lost: "It is simply bereavement that leads us here, to these images." (16) Loss engenders these "images" that eventually lead to new thought, creating inventive juxtapositions and fresh concepts. He goes even further by drawing attention to his own creative process and his reconfiguration of mourning when he says,

What has been lost thus far? It's just tar on a highway, bound for ocean. Or, it's the migratory flight of a carrier pigeon. It is all things that move and breathe, coalesced into sound...It is octaves, repeated in a funhouse mirror until a decibel level is reached that a dog alone may hear. I am the dog that hears, the dog that conducts, the dog that puts bones on the table. (50)

In this citation, the poet refers to himself as the *ramasseur* of the fragmented pieces created by loss. He "conducts" the broken pieces into poetry to be put onto the table for the public to digest.

Furthermore, Fieled directly mentions memory, saying that it is "as sweet as reality" (59) and

then relates the two of these to dreams. This statement disregards any difference between the past and the present in terms of experience and one's emotional state. His comparison to dreams, then, links them all together through their capacity to provoke strong emotional experiences and vivid imagery. However, he separates the dream world from the others by saying, "I have learned to what extent dreams are real. They may not be solid as a cast-iron pot, but they are enough." (59) But *enough* for what exactly? Here Fieled suggests that dreams suffice as inspiration for artistic expression. A few, short lines after, he sums up this theory of creation in stating, "It is the hour of feeling, when singing must cease." (59) Here, "the hour of feeling" refers to the present, profiting from the woman he finds himself next to in order to experience the moment as the present. However, as he states himself, these privileged instances of living in the present moment exclude the possibility of creative release; during these moments, "singing must cease." In one of his other poems in which he references the power of imagination, he says, "I know that I had to dream an opera to really sing. I know I had to dream singing to really write." (54) The poet's creativity cultivated in this dream world derives directly from the concept of losing control. Once his subconscious eliminates all barriers constructed by reason or rationality, Fieled really starts to sing.

Opera Bufo bulges at the seams with drug references to describe an elimination of control. Cocaine and mescaline dispossess users of their governance over their own visual faculties, causing hallucinations and amplifying all external stimuli. This state of being induced by drugs parallels the dream state that Fieled exploits for tapping into new creativity. Drugs, however, grant extended access to this alternative existence in which one's subconscious yields to consciousness, whereas the dreamer forgoes all control involuntarily. Fieled references the prevalent drug culture of the psychedelic rock scene in San Francisco during the 1960's and 70's to infuse his poetry with this theme: "stay where shadows press themselves in upon you. Stay with the purple riders and their sage buttons." (16) This is the first drug allusion of *Opera Bufo*, and boldly opens the doors for others to follow. His mention of "purple riders" adorned with "sage buttons" points directly to the band New Riders of the Purple Sage, a country rock band that emerged from this drug and music culture of California in 1969. The term "purple riders" describes users of a mildly hallucinogenic aromatic herb found in Southern California commonly used in Native American ceremonies. Though Fieled makes this insinuation early on in his work, he picks up the thread again towards the end when Maria Callas says to him, "We are all purple riders" as she slowly exhales a ribbon of smoke. Though the author also mentions the use of cocaine, this theme of hallucinogenic drugs is more tightly weaved into his story as he openly associates it with Maria Callas, one of the narrator's inspirations, his former lover, and the woman who performs his *Opera Bufo*.

In addition, the poet dissolves boundaries signifying binary opposition to destroy conventional associations and meaning. Many images created by Fieled seem cryptic, and the reader must often wrestle the sentence into some sort of submission from which he or she can draw any digestible meaning. For example, he says things such as, "The history of popcorn is a minor third that can be squelched by intense bed-thuds," (31) or "keep your pug-face for the aesthete tax collecting slobber-heads." (28) He also tests one's logic by using such hypothetical reasoning as, "If you were a cup of finished ice cream, I'd be a brown-eyed moon-goddess." (11) These lines disorient the reader and also reflect on Fieled's own state of mind during the creation process. In describing his own style, Fieled says, "As for

fluorescence, those crayons were always my favorites anyway. If the color is off, it's because my set collapsed, if not into nullity, then into plurality.” (54) He tears down the blatant contrasts separating nullity from plurality and life from death to create a space in between, seemingly void of sense and control, from which poetry and song spring forth in abundance. He says that “song cannot be spared when life and death adhere,” (56) and it is within this grey space that Fieled writes. Inside this space, in which everything seems arbitrary and undeterminable, people create new connections between words and images, create new meaning, and better understand themselves.

In losing control and sacrificing reason, Fieled actually *gains* control over his own creative style and the structure of his work. The opening sentence in which he mentions Chopin establishes the poet's theme and perspective that he will tease out during the fifty-nine poems to follow. He relies heavily on the concept of absence and its multiple contributions to the creative process in the first quarter of his opera before he enters into other themes. In his first poem, Fieled says,

What's lost might be a sea shell or a tea cup or the bloody scalp of an Indian; it hardly matters. When you are lost, the heart recedes from exterior currents, too much in sync with itself, its groove vicissitudes. Each encounter, rather than revealing new rhythms, is experienced as a clangorous din, a pounding...to push the heart deeper and deeper into pitiless darkness...We squirm within ourselves to the sound of the Devil's opera bufa. (5)

He disregards what sends him into this “pitiless darkness” to focus on the experience he lives once there. Fieled plants the seed of an idea that should slowly blossom in the reader's mind through their experience with his work and returns to the original concept in his final poems. Eight poems from the end, he begins an “inventory” of what is lost, of what remains, and of what has been gained. A few poems before that, he says, “What has been lost thus far? It's just tar on a highway, bound for ocean,” (50) lines that provide deeper reflection upon an idea that was similarly stated in the first lines of his work. In using this structure, Fieled has created a strong thematic foundation that circles back on itself, and he fills the middle with layers of relevant ideas, juxtaposed colors and images, and a stylized imagery presented in a simple, yet very rich and highly poetic style.

Opera Bufo outlines Adam Fieled's digestion of loss and memory that leads him into the grey space between nullity and plurality from which creation is born. His poetry explores hallucinogenic drugs, sexual promiscuity, and cryptic language play to cope with absence in a positive way. It is his artistic creation, his opera, his voice, his poetry; it is music that bleeds.

